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The Damaging Consequences of Toxic Gym Culture

In today's world, it seems like every teenager is going to the gym to get strong and look good. Although the rising trend of weightlifting among the youth population may seem positive, it is the contrary for many reasons. Pressured to look aesthetic and be as strong as possible, gym-goers often turn to androgenic anabolic steroids to achieve their goals. Sport Integrity Australia states, "According to the Australian National Drug Strategy Household Survey of 2019, non-medical anabolic steroid use almost tripled in the 18 years between 2001 and 2019" (*The worrying trend of steroid use in young adults*). Additionally, an online questionnaire by healthcare firm Medicecks revealed that 75% of respondents had considered steroid use due to dissatisfaction with the appearance of their bodies (*Why is steroid use rising among male bodybuilders?*). This misuse of androgenic anabolic steroids is associated with a wide range of adverse consequences that range from aesthetic (e.g., acne) to critical (e.g., cardiovascular disease and liver function), with evidence of potential psychological damage (e.g., increased aggression and mania) (Bates et al.).

In addition to anabolic steroid use, physical injury has become prevalent in fitness spaces. There is an increasing desire for young athletes to achieve peak performance, and resistance training is one of the most popular and effective forms of conditioning. The use of resistance training is widespread among high school, college, and professional athletes. However, resistance training for young athletes has been controversial due to the high risk of injury,

especially for those who are inexperienced or push themselves to their absolute limits (Myer et al.).

“Toxic gym culture” is a term that is quickly spreading throughout society, known for its damaging effects on young people’s minds and bodies. It undermines the fundamental principles of fitness and weight lifting, taking on many forms, from spreading misinformation on the internet to body shaming others. After examining the current research in this area, I believe that social media is the primary factor that perpetuates toxic gym culture. Social media has skyrocketed in popularity among young adults and teenagers in the past few decades. With the growing trend of social media use among teenagers, the demand for praise and approval has never been higher. Many teenagers today determine their self-worth based on social media followers, likes, views, and other various quantifiable measurements of peer approval. However, many fitness influencers on the internet utilize unethical methods to obtain more likes and followers, such as digitally enhancing pictures that they post or spreading misinformation that is often too good to be true and rather a gimmick to get more clicks. In addition to those who post on social media, consumers, often teenagers, perpetuate the issue further by comparing themselves to these influencers who have perfect body proportions, “snatched” waists, and glossy skin. These unrealistic standards pressure adolescents to look a certain way and be super strong, or else they are not good enough. The growing significance of social media in adolescents’ self-esteem could serve as a basis for comprehending and, ultimately, addressing the rising trend of risky fitness-related behaviors among adolescents.

To combat toxic behaviors in the gym, we must break down toxic gym culture and identify its causes. Toxic gym culture takes on many various forms in fitness spaces, most commonly in the form of body shaming. In today’s society, there is a heavy emphasis on striving

for the “ideal” body type. Men must have a big chest, broad shoulders, and a thin waist. Women must have that perfect hourglass figure, defined by a slim waist, wide hips, and large buttocks. If these standards are not met, you are simply not good enough in society’s eyes. Industries play a pivotal role in perpetuating such unrealistic standards through advertisements, promotions, and marketing. A 2019 article by Nadia Craddock et al. states, “The fashion, beauty, and advertising industries have been positioned as key contributors to body dissatisfaction through the promotion of unrealistic and homogenous appearance ideals” (Craddock et al.). These standards are further perpetuated on social media by fitness influencers showing off their impossibly aesthetic bodies. However, fitness influencers are often untruthful regarding the content they post on social media. Many of these influencers do not look the way they do online. Pictures posted online of muscular, shredded fitness influencers are often just products of lighting and angle work used to gain more likes and followers. A survey by Truepic, a photo and video verification platform, found that 64% of the U.S. adults polled had edited photos of themselves before posting them to social media (News and Deskey). Although reaching for high goals is not inherently bad, the over-emphasis on aesthetics in today’s world causes many gym-goers to look down on themselves, causing body dysmorphia and the development of eating disorders in many individuals. In their book, *The Sorority Body Image Program : Group Leader Guide*, Carolyn Black Becker and Eric Stice note, “One in ten adolescent females experience threshold or subthreshold bulimia nervosa, but less than 25% of them ever seek treatment. Because body dissatisfaction is so prevalent in our society, it is often overlooked until it becomes a life-threatening illness” (Becker and Stice).

Society’s unrealistic standards can cause many individuals to turn to steroids as a solution. A 2021 study featured by Sports Medicine found, “Image-centric social media use

[was] positively associated with the use of dietary supplements and [androgenic anabolic steroids]” (Hilkens et al.) among young male gym-goers. Further, the *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* asserts, “These next generation of users are going to be documenting their body transformations more and more and communicating through social media extensively... It will eventually lead to the next evolution of steroid use which may be taking drugs purely to be bigger to gain more likes, followers and admirers online... this leads to (in their eyes) more social and physical capital” (Richardson et al.). Undoubtedly, the rising popularity of anabolic androgenic steroids is a serious issue, as the side effects of such drugs can cause detrimental damage to young teenagers’ bodies. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, anabolic steroids can lead to early heart attacks, strokes, liver tumors, kidney failure, and psychiatric problems. In addition, stopping steroid use can cause depression, often leading to the resumption of use (*Steroids and other appearance and performance enhancing drugs (apeds)*). In addition to steroid use, eating disorders are another detriment of toxic gym culture. Although less extreme than anabolic steroids, eating disorders are significantly more common among gym-goers. Counting macronutrients and excessive exercise are parts of gym culture that make eating disorders more prevalent among men than many realize. Although not yet recognized as an official eating disorder, orthorexia is characterized by an obsession with eating clean and healthy. Individuals who suffer from orthorexia are often plagued by guilt when they stray from their diet, isolating them from social events and negatively impacting their mental health. *The Daily Illini* asserts, “The stereotype that gym bros only eat bland chicken and rice is heard far and wide... With high protein goals to reach daily, every meal creates a challenge to consume as much protein as possible... and makes eating feel like a chore” (Lakkaraju).

Additionally, social media often puts pressure on individuals, particularly males, to not only be super aesthetic but also unrealistically strong. The obsession that comes with being as strong as possible can lead to physical injury. Pressured to max out and lift weights heavier than they are capable of, gym-goers often push themselves to their absolute limits, increasing their risk of injury. Back strain, rotator cuff injury, biceps tear, inflammation in the knee. These are just some of the most common injuries that occur in the gym, often caused by doing too much over time (overuse injury), doing too much at one time (acute injury), or using improper form while lifting (McCallum). In a study by Lisa Noteboom and more, “Young males were more associated with fitness injuries, potentially due to different ‘risk-taking’ behavior or training intensity compared to elder people and females” (Noteboom et al.).

Another significant factor that perpetuates toxic gym culture is the spread of misinformation and pseudoscience. “Do this ab circuit for ten minutes every day, and your belly fat will be gone in a month!” “Add this to your workout routine and watch your strength skyrocket!” Many of these claims by fitness influencers that a particular exercise or secret trick will help you achieve a goal in an unrealistic time period are false and merely posted for easy clicks and views. The Journal of Product and Brand Management asserts, “Fake news tends to spread like wildfire on digital and social media channels due to the sensationalism of the claims” (de Regt et al.). In line with this, supplements are often put on a pedestal and overexaggerated in their ability to help you grow muscle or lose weight without proper scientific evidence. The truth of the matter is that achieving your dream body takes time, and there is no secret hack or magical exercise that will hasten the process. Moreover, many influencers often preach new, “innovative” ways to perform exercises that supposedly lead to more muscle gain. However, in reality, these

influencers are teaching nothing but improper form, which can lead individuals to injure themselves.

Body shaming, unrealistic standards, and the diffusion of misinformation. These are just a few of the many significant factors that perpetuate toxic gym culture. This harsh, competitive environment is already bad enough, but unfortunately, some gym-goers, often those who are more fit or advanced, further escalate the toxicity of gym environments by looking down on or excluding others who are less fit or newer to weightlifting. The gym should be an open space where everyone should feel comfortable, yet in today's world, it is overrun by exclusivity and elitism. It is apparent that toxic gym culture has serious consequences, especially on young teens, and the damaging effects of toxic gym culture will only continue to grow unless we do something about it.

So what can we do to combat toxic gym culture? To reverse the growing malice of toxic gym culture, I propose we attack its roots and break down the foundation of toxicity in the gym. The first place to start is social media, as it is the best medium for spreading ideas, messages, and information rapidly. The fitness industry should actively work to promote diverse representations by showcasing a broad range of body types, ages, and fitness levels. This not only challenges unrealistic beauty standards but also sends a clear message that everyone is welcome and valued in the gym. Representation matters, and when individuals see people who look like them succeeding, it can be incredibly empowering.

Social media influencers are people who have built a reputation on the internet, meaning they have great power and influence on those who consume their content. Therefore, fitness influencers on the internet should make a proactive effort to stop the circulation of misinformation and be more truthful regarding the content they post on the internet to promote

body positivity and spread helpful knowledge within the gym community. Many influencers have already taken steps in this direction, posting images and videos taken in regular lighting conditions, devoid of filters and any digital enhancement. Social media posts such as these spread a message of positivity throughout the gym community, reminding gym-goers that even the shredded, god-like influencers are just human, just like everyone else. Transparency and authenticity help followers see the reality of what a fitness journey should look like, including both the ups and downs, ultimately setting more realistic expectations regarding fitness and health. This can also convey messages of self-acceptance, encouraging individuals to embrace and celebrate their bodies for what they are rather than striving for an idealized image. Promoting a culture of education and truthfulness can help deflate myths and misconceptions that contribute to toxic attitudes.

Simultaneously, internet users who consume social media should also take precautionary measures to protect themselves from the animosities of social media. A 2019 study found that “narcissistic youth’s attention-seeking increased following experiences of ego threat, such as social rejection.” Ultimately, “narcissistic adolescents’ attention-seeking on social media, particularly as a way to recover from social rejection, might backfire and ultimately contribute to an ongoing pattern of self-defeating behavior.” (Hawk et al.). Raising awareness about the dangers of toxic gym culture and shedding light on the deceit that plagues the internet can help everyday gym-goers to protect themselves from the threats of body shaming, pseudoscience, and unrealistic expectations. This will not only protect individuals but also contribute to breaking the self-perpetuating cycle that is toxic gym culture.

Public institutions can also raise awareness and spread body positivity. According to *The Sorority Body Image Program : Group Leader Guide*, “Young women in college are at a

particularly high risk for dangerous body dissatisfaction, and this risk can be exponentially increased for members of sororities” (Becker and Stice). Therefore, institutions such as colleges and universities can play an influential role in promoting positive body image among teenagers, who are the most susceptible to body dissatisfaction and dysmorphia. Institutions can open clubs, workshops, seminars, and other informational material that address issues such as body positivity, mental health, and respectful behavior. As mentioned before, learning to protect oneself from deceitful online information is one of the best ways to combat toxic gym culture. Schools and universities can incorporate media literacy into their education to help individuals critically evaluate information from social media, advertisements, and fitness influencers. In an era of misinformation and pseudoscience, media literacy acts as a defense against manipulation, enabling individuals to recognize and resist attempts to deceive or manipulate through media channels.

To conclude, the spread of toxic gym culture is rampant and devastating to the core principles and values of fitness. Toxic gym culture is rooted in a culture that emphasizes competition, narcissism, and selfishness. However, by identifying the factors that perpetuate toxic gym culture in fitness spaces, we can make an effort to combat toxic gym culture and create a more inclusive and supportive gym environment. Leaders such as fitness influencers and staff members should make a consistent effort to build a foundation of body positivity, mental health, and respectful behavior in the gym community. Exemplifying and promoting these values can inspire cultural shifts within the gym community. Gym-goers should also ensure that everyone feels safe, included, and respected. If everybody does their part, we can reform the gym into a place where everyone can thrive on their journey to health and well-being.

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